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Written in conjunction with the "Student Expressions" anthology but useful as a resource on its own, this handbook discusses the writing process and the way one teacher used it in a junior high school classroom. The narrative presented in the handbook is a distillation of the different approaches the teacher tried with different groups. The handbook discusses the advantages of using techniques, strategies and concepts that make up an integral part of the Northland Junior High Language Arts Curriculum: language and learning connected to the child's own world. Sections of the handbook are Starting Out; The Classroom; Writing; Developing the Writing Process; Getting Students Started; The Five Stages of the Writing Process; Evaluation; and The Teacher as Writer. (Contains five references.) (RS)

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Teacher's Resource Guide for *Student Expressions Anthology*

CS215271

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Teacher's Resource Guide for
Student Expressions Anthology (Junior High level)

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JUNIOR HIGH

TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE
FOR
STUDENT EXPRESSIONS
ANTHOLOGY

Northland
SCHOOL DIVISION
No. 61

CS 15271

FOREWORD

The most exciting thing about involvement in this project for me has been to see the modelling of writing done by the teachers who created the project. Through their active participation in writing in the classroom, they show the students that all of them — teachers and students — are writers in a community of writers. As a writer who visits schools often, I welcome this change of paradigm. Writers write not to get marks, but to process reality (as John Gardner says in *The Art of Fiction*) and to communicate. Whether that writing is a private journal, a personal letter, a poem or meditation written for a family celebration, a learning exercise, a piece written with intent to publish, the same principles apply. Writing comes from the heart and spirit, not the head and intellect. Young writers — and all writers — do best if they are given not only permission to use their hearts but an example of — and encouragement from — other writers who struggle with the same issues. And, make no mistake, no matter how long we write, some of those issues such as that of confidence, of reaching for a personal voice and of searching for excellence — never go away. They simply change as we change, providing a lifetime "spiral curriculum" for every writer.

Recently, I taught an advanced adult workshop. I arrived to find six participants: four were adults ranging in age from 27 to 45; the other two were young people, one still in high school and the other in junior high school. I was somewhat surprised, but carried on as planned. When we introduced ourselves the youngest of the two youths said, "Hi, I'm _____, I'm fourteen years old and I've been writing for six years. I started in Grade 3." This young writer spent the weekend participating when indicated and when the curriculum was not relevant, working hard at writing. Clearly, there was nothing unusual for this person to be among writers, and in focus, attentiveness and attitude, I saw someone who acted not like a stereotyped fourteen-year-old, but as a writer of six years' experience. Many of us envied that head start, wished we could go back 20 or 30 years to start our careers again with that clear understanding of our writing agendas.

This project shows us that any student can have that understanding. And who knows — maybe some of you teachers reading it will finally receive the same permission — to dare to express your life through writing.

Candas Jane Dorsey
Editor

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INTRODUCTION

On my desk is a binder filled with my writing. It's an essential part of my self-expression. When I write I have an assured voice that takes strong stands that I would rarely articulate. I can probe my intellectual, emotional and physical responses to issues going on around me.

Writing can lead me to understanding; it has helped me grieve, and put words to the pain and loss I've suffered. I've written in response to another author's writing. Writing is one way I maintain balance. It allows me to step back and place things in perspective.

I've always written in my classroom when my students write. They commented that I was forever stroking things out, starting new pages and spending time staring off into space. I told them what I was doing and let them read some of what I'd written. This sharing created a shift in the atmosphere of the classroom. My nervousness about showing what I wrote was met with supportive comments from the students. When I took in their writing assignments I found myself looking forward to hearing the voice of each writer. I realized we were all engaged in the same task: struggling to find the language to express something important to each of us and looking for support, help and encouragement as we worked. When I incorporated the writing process into my Language Arts class the concept of *writers in a community of writers* really took hold.

This teacher's resource guide has been written in conjunction with the *Student Expressions* anthology, but can be used as a resource on its own. The main focus of the handbook is to discuss the writing process and the way I have used it in my classroom. This narrative is a distillation of the different approaches I have tried with different groups. The other members of the committee who developed the *Student Expressions* anthology shared their insights as well. The ideas are applicable to any Language Arts classroom.

One thing is certain, Northland teachers are involved with students who come to their classes with a great variety of abilities in the usage of English. It is our challenge to give them the opportunities to develop their language skills in all five strands of the Language Arts curriculum. This book attempts to tackle the problem on two fronts, first by providing literary selections culled from their peers around the division; second by examining how the writing process might be used within the classroom to generate language usage, creativity and response. I believe using the writing process moves us nearer to the world of our students, allowing us to be party to their views of what is important, what is critical, and what forces

shape their lives. It is a powerful and revealing process that reshapes the traditional order and structure of the classroom. It demands risk from both the students and the teacher. Successfully tapping into each child's creativity can make your teaching year both vital and refreshing.

The selections in the *Student Expressions* anthology are the results of positive writing experiences in Northland Junior High Language Arts classrooms. Each story was selected to prompt discussion, to provide a thematic focus for other literature, and to provoke your students to write on the ideas brought forward in the selection. The *Student Expressions* stories and this resource guide will help you to consider the following ideas:

1. **Our students come from rich cultures.** We need to recognize and place value on the experience and knowledge our students bring with them into the classroom.
2. **We must bring the importance of each student's world into the learning situation.**
3. **When we allow students to "cut loose" with writing we have to expect the unexpected.** When allowing students to write about what is important to them **we need to respect their choices.**

This book will discuss the advantages of using techniques, strategies and concepts that make up an integral part of the Junior High Language Arts Curriculum: **language and learning connected to the child's own world**.

While divided into five categories, the writing process is **a means of encouraging creativity** as well as focus. This rarely occurs in a linear manner. Each student will tackle the process uniquely.

The writing process has been the most effective teaching strategy that I have ever used. My classroom environment is more pleasant, providing me with a much better understanding of the students I teach. The writing I receive is vital and alive. I'm always surprised by the honest, clear, unhindered voices of students embarked upon writing experiences that involve some part of their lives.

STARTING OUT

At the beginning of each year I develop the environment I want in the classroom by doing the following:

1. **I organize the classroom so that prominent space is set aside to display student-produced writing.**
2. **I discuss the types of writing that occur within the Language Arts classroom, then I introduce the writing process and explain how it will be used for the entire year.**
3. **I give each student a file folder which will contain all of that student's writing activities for the year.**
4. **I make writing a part of each one of my Language Arts classes; particularly at the beginning of the year.**

THE CLASSROOM

There are a number of ways to set up a classroom to make it conducive to writing. In my classroom I set aside the back wall as "THE WRITER'S WALL". I utilize a large colourful sign to identify and emphasize the importance of this space in the room.

On a side wall I place a poster of the five major components of the Writing Process. Over the blackboard at the front of the room I place the banner: "WRITING IS FOR EVERYONE". I want students to be constantly influenced by and reminded of the importance and value of the writing experience.

WRITING

It is not necessarily true that Junior High students dislike writing, but there is often resistance when it is first introduced. This is why I make writing a part of each class at the beginning of the year. If a student's experiences with writing have been largely negative (correcting a plethora of grammatical and spelling errors, the assignments highly structured and involving little of the world the student knows) the child's resistance to writing may be very hie[2].

James Britten suggests there are three types of writing:

1. **Poetic** — crafted language in literary genres.
2. **Expressive** — language of the self in a comfortable milieu (diaries, letters, poems etc.).
3. **Transactional** — language that gets the job done.

Most writing done in schools is transactional. It involves the restating of ideas and information learned in classes, from lectures, texts, and encyclopedias. The writing is specific and the outcome is usually very important to the success of the student. Most evaluations use transactional language: one- or two-sentence answers to specific questions. This can lead to stressful situations particularly when a student's confidence in English is low.

The writing process focuses on *expressive* writing. This is central to both the written and oral content of the course. The writing begins with students writing for no one other than themselves. It grows outward to writing that can be shared in an atmosphere of mutual trust. This requires a need to change the psychological setting of the classroom to relieve some of the stresses, allowing the students to become comfortable with the act of writing.

This is not to suggest that transactional writing is not important within the context of a Language Arts classroom; but in a situation where teachers ask questions to which we already know the answers, we create a situation that is rare in the "real" world and we deny students the opportunity to use their own language and their own experiences.

DEVELOPING THE WRITING PROCESS

The key to developing this program in your classroom is to focus on the process involved. It's important to remember that everyone comes to writing differently. This program recognizes that, and is flexible enough to let writers involve themselves in the writing process in ways most suitable to each of them.

I place a poster on a side wall of my classroom which identifies the five stages of the writing process and suggests the sense of flow between the stages. It looks a bit like this:

PRE-WRITING

DRAFTING

REVISING

EDITING

PUBLISHING

▲ P E R C O L A T I N G ▼

The arrow pointed at both ends suggests that new ideas in content and form can enter the writing process at any stage. Ideas are continually percolating through the entire piece and can send a writer right back to drafting with a new idea to explore.

To give a sense of how much time is spent on each part of the writing process I use the following set of figures with my classes. Professional writers spend:

- **10%-20% of their time on pre-writing activities**
- **5%-10% of their time on first drafts**
- **70%-85% of their time on revisions,**

for any piece of writing published. Not each writer works this way of course, but these statistics help students become more willing to spend time thinking out what they want to write, and make revisions once they've completed that first draft.

GETTING THE STUDENTS STARTED

FILE FOLDERS

I hand out file folders at the beginning of each year. I explain the function of the file folder to each class, and have students store them in a class file in the filing cabinet. I have a few rules concerning these files, developed through trial and error over the years:

THE WRITING FILE IS ALWAYS LEFT IN THE CLASSROOM

Individual pieces of writing may be taken home for further work but the file folder is the storage area for all works in progress during the year.

This method helps prevent students from losing their writing assignments during the year, and gets the work off of my desk where it could get buried for months. Students who finish other assignments then have writing on which they can work readily available in the classroom.

THE WRITING FILE IS CONFIDENTIAL

Each student is responsible to ensure sensitive writing remains in the file folder, in the filing cabinet. Very sensitive writing should be kept at home, or in a safe place.

ALL WRITING IS VALID

Writing in progress should be stored in the file folder. This means that those pieces that just don't work at the drafting stage should be kept for future exploration. An incomplete draft shouldn't be thrown out.

There are two problems to contend with here: correction fluid and crumpled up paper. Correction fluid is banned by most teachers in their classrooms for a variety of reasons, including the fact that not all correction fluids are water based. This fluid is often a safety net for starting writers, but I allow it to be used only in the final steps of the editing stage, where a simple error can be corrected to save recopying the whole page. I never allow correction fluid during the drafting stage.

The crumpling of paper is more problematic. As the class becomes more used to pre-writing and drafting exercises the students should do less paper crumpling than at the beginning of the year.

THE FIVE STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

1. PRE-WRITING

Most students seem to have a fear of the blank page. Therefore, a great deal of time and attention needs to be paid to this first stage.

Students, especially those who are used to specifically defined writing assignments, are unprepared to choose what to write about themselves. When a student howls, "I don't know what to write!", it usually means, "I don't know how to begin."

Because most students are hesitant to simply sit down and write, the first series of collected drafts may be very limited. The first thing I assure all students is that they do not write about ANYTHING; they write about what they know, what is vital and important to them. Getting words on paper is my priority, so I use the following strategies to get them started:

- The *Ideas* List

Students make up a list of 20 things they feel they could write about. While the class does this on foolscap I write 20 things I can write about on the blackboard.

Example:

1. Volleyball Tournaments
2. Bus Trips
3. My First Summer in Desmarais
4. Teaching at Mistassiniy
5. Sing-A-Long Tape Machines
6. At the Beach
7. King of the Ditch
8. Winter Blues
9. Changing Diapers
10. Wakes
11. Changing a Tire
12. Fabulous '60s
13. Real Rock Music
14. My First Car
15. Hot Lunch
16. Friendship
17. California
18. School "Cliques"
19. Jokes
20. Cruising the Halls by a Vice-Principal

I ask students to help me, and encourage them to borrow from my list as well as classmates' lists. I tell them these ideas should be placed at the beginning of their file folder and should be added to continuously throughout the year.

I wander around the room to help make students' ideas more specific. For example, a number of boys usually put hunting down as one of their ideas. I suggest that there are at least three different stories, probably more, based on what they hunted for. They can develop even more stories if they describe specific hunting trips.

I generally allow a half hour for this. I don't worry about each student having exactly 20 ideas listed. The breakthrough has already been achieved. They've demonstrated to themselves that they *DO* have things to write about.

Then I ask the class to select one idea from their lists and write about it for the next class. I try to make this a homework assignment but leave enough class time to allow all students to get something on paper for the next day. The only requirement for this writing is that it allows the reader to understand the writer's idea/experience. There is no other length requirement. This is important. I tell them I will select one topic I had listed on the blackboard, write about it, and read my draft to the class at the beginning of the next period.

The following is the first draft of a story I started from the list.

> I was listening to some student's music in the hall the other day at school. The kid was excited, this was the new Metallica or some such. The band sounded like an amplified murder, and on the ghetto blaster it drove my cranky spirit to distraction.
>
> "You call that music?", I howled, pointing at the boom box rattling to the beat on the floor. "Turn it off, NOW!"
>
> The boy took ghetto blaster and tape and headed outside where a group of appreciative friends gathered 'round to listen. I shuddered. "They call THAT music?", I asked another Grade 8'er. I don't think he heard me. His eyes were a little distant and he kept muttering something that may have been the lyrics under his breath. Something about the end of the world, but he seemed relaxed about it.
>
> I stomped back into the office to get some distance between me and that infernal racket. I made a comment to the secretary that "rock music" in our day at least had melody and words you could understand. The secretary nodded her agreement. I went into my office humming a little ditty that was popular when I was a teenager. It was

that well thought out tune by the Castaways, a one-hit band from 1966.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire
Your nose is longer than a telephone wire!"

Yes, those were the days when songs didn't make any sense at all. But when I was 14 it had a beat, I could dance to it and it had a melody hook that made the song damn near unforgettable. It would wander around your brain long after your mind begged you to turn it off.

We didn't have ghetto blasters back in 1966 when I was 14. Cassette tape recorders were just coming out onto the market. You could buy LPs or 45s. LPs had 10-12 songs on them and ran about five dollars. 45s were a buck each and contained a song heard on the radio and a flip side song which no one ever listened to. We used record players then. There were stereos then but most people had good old mono players. My parents had bought theirs in the 1950s and it had one neat feature. 45s would play over and over without shutting off. I could listen to the same song 10 or 12 times without having to get up off the couch. I loved it, but my mother would usually say something like:

"You call that music? I've heard that same song twelve times now. Turn it off, NOW!"

"But I was just getting into it Mom. C'mon, everyone listens to this song all the time, it's good."

By this point Mom was looking at me with a glazed far away look, muttering what sounded like the lyrics.

"They're coming to take me away,
ha! ha! he! he! ho! ho!
To the funny farm, where life is
beautiful all the time . . . ."

Yes, Napoleon XIV could sure drive 'em crazy.

This particular song was done to a 4/4 drumbeat and nothing else. The effect would render us catatonic, especially after 20 or 30 consecutive playings. I loved it. My parents bought me my own record player so that I could listen to it in my room; upstairs, with the door closed.

My mother constantly complained about my taste in music, the way the band members looked. They have long hair, they look like girls, don't they ever bathe? (How she figured all this out from listening to the record perplexed me, but it never stopped her.) She said music in her day had melody, lyrics that made sense. (Low blow, Mother.)

I told her that the songs were written for us, not her. I was quite indignant too. I told her if she really listened to the songs (Napoleon XIV excepted) she would see how good they were. I played her my Byrds songs, my Rolling Stones songs and my Herman's Hermits songs. Then I made a fatal error. I played her Rubber Soul by the Beatles. She liked it. She would play it in the daytime when I wasn't home. She told her friends about it. Soon it got around that Gibbs' mother LIKED the Beatles. God was I embarrassed.

At the beginning of the next class I read my story to them before I collect their writing. I confess I'm usually a bit nervous. With this example I chose something I thought might connect with the class as the audience and I was careful to make myself the speaker in the piece.

Then I collect their pieces. That evening I read each one and comment on something I like in the writing: **an idea, a statement, an observation, a nifty piece of language usage — anything.** I welcome each student to my class and sign it. **I don't mark the piece in any other way.** I want to change the psychological environment within my classroom. I want the students to feel comfortable with me reading their writing. I want to demonstrate the courtesy they must show each other when working together on writing projects. I always feel vulnerable when I read my piece in class. Remembering this makes it easier to respond with care to all the writing my classes give me.

- Timed Sustained Writing

I do this most often at the beginning of the year. The instructions are simple: **each person, me included, writes for five minutes non-stop.** There is no topic, we write about whatever comes to mind. If needed, students can repeat a word over and over until something else pops into their heads. This is non-threatening writing intended to **get students to write every day; reduce their fear of the blank page and loosen words from the students' natural hesitation**.

The students will complain of tired hands after about three minutes. Some students will balk at repeating words. Others do not need to do this exercise routinely to focus on writing. Each class devotes different amounts of time to this particular exercise, depending on the need.

Again I share my writing with the class. My problems with coherence, grammar and syntax allow students to write without worrying because I've demonstrated the expectations of the exercise to them.

The *whatever comes to mind* approach encourages students who stop writing when they can't find the right word. It can even break the correction fluid habit, because mistakes are acknowledged as a natural part of the exercise.

- Using r.a.f.t.s.

Once the students have developed writing strategies to get them started I introduce a process to focus each piece of writing before they begin the draft. It's called a r.a.f.t.s. and it's attributed to Dick Addler. I've found it a consistently successful exercise to allow a writer to have a clear goal in mind as he begins a piece of writing.

A r.a.f.t.s. looks like this:

r = role of the speaker
a = audience the piece is intended for
f = form the writing will take
t = tense of the piece, past or present
s = strong verb used to show the intent of the writing

I begin by referring back to the piece of writing I'd read to the class after making up the ideas list. I ask who they thought the speaker of the piece was, and who I had written the piece for. I explain r.a.f.t.s. to the students, brainstorming lists as I go along:

- **Role of the speaker**

The writer decides who is narrating the story. The speaker could be the writer, a family member, teenager, elder, someone new to the community. . . you get the picture. A large list of potential speakers in the student's file or up on the wall in the classroom can lead to a lot more variety in the student's writing.

- **Audience**

The writer decides who the receiver of the message intended in the writing will be. This could be anyone on the list you've developed for potential speakers. The audience may be as small or as large as the writer wishes. **The role of the audience is among the most important decisions the writer will make about a piece of writing.** The choice of audience can influence the tone of the piece, the style of language used by the speaker, and the details and objectives of the writing. Think of the differences in the oral language used by students when talking among friends versus when talking to the principal. Children often have a greater need for a real audience than adults who have learned to write for readers in general.

- **Form**

The writer decides the genre of writing the piece will become. A list of writing genres on a wall in the classroom or in the student's writing file can lend even more variety to the choices in

the writing students attempt. Some forms include: poems, narratives, expositions, letters, essays, notes, editorials, monologues, scripts, tall tales, riddles, advertisements, diary entries. . . .

- **Tense**

The piece is usually written in the present or the past tense. If the student decides this ahead of time he may be able to get better control over tense usage. It will then allow him to experiment between the tenses intentionally. This might require a class lesson on tense and tense usage at some point during the year.

- **Strong Verb**

Directs the writing. This writing could: inform, expose, entertain, predict, reflect, simplify, explore, analyze, hypothesize, reflect, reminisce, persuade, sell, provide, assist or intensify, depending on what the writer wants the piece to sound like.

Getting students to make a r.a.f.t.s. before they begin writing will give them more assurance as they attempt the first draft of the writing.

My r.a.f.t.s. for this teacher's guide looked like this:

r = long winded Language Arts teacher
a = other Language Arts teachers
f = a teacher's guide explaining the writing process
t = present tense
s = inform, involve, revitalize

One way to practice making r.a.f.t.s. is to have your class make one for a piece of writing in the *Student Expressions* book or an anthology you use in the classroom. This will give them a chance to decide how published writers might have organized and planned their writing, and let them realize "real writers" go through the same kind of process. **It's also an effective way of tying in literature and student writing.**

The other teachers who worked to develop the *Student Expressions* anthology were asked to discuss the techniques and exercises that have been most successful in getting their students to start writing.

Douglas Ross, a teacher at Athabasca Delta School in Fort Chipewyan asked his students to discuss their views on writing and to answer these questions:

How do you write?
What keeps you going when you are writing?
Here's what two of his students said:

> "Students just write. Some students write about what they think the teacher is trying to get at. Others just get an idea and write until their thoughts about the topic run out."

"Writing happens when a student is comfortable with a set of thoughts or an idea. Writing goes on for as long as the idea lasts for the student."

Neil Kowal, teacher at Elizabeth Settlement School, writes:

Spontaneous writing is a result, in many instances of a creative mind which may have been infused with a word picture which results in writing that is directed to a specific topic. I often will mention a single word or several related words regarding a season, special day (Halloween, Easter, or Thanksgiving, etc.) or a local event (Snow Carnival, Rodeo, Hockey Tournament or any other sporting event). Students may write a poem, paragraph or a short story by expanding on one word or a group of words. Rough drafts are shared with students, handed in, discussed and final drafts are written. These pieces are displayed. Illustrations are always accepted.

Teachers can extract a much higher level of expression in written and oral work if they are aware of the interests of their students.

One good introduction to writing is an oral exercise in which students are asked to speak 10 to 20 seconds on a general topic as given by the teacher or classmates (like fashion, teen music, hockey, horses, movies, etc.). At the conclusion of this exercise the students are asked to write about any one of the oral presentations.

Oratory/public speaking skills are easily developed and as time passes oral presentations may be increased up to one minute with no written preparation.

2. DRAFTING:

The best definition I've heard of for drafting is *placing a vision on paper*. This is the first attempt to explore the idea the student has chosen to write about. This will be done in **the child's own language**. Medved and Torbe suggest:

> **"that language, and the social uses of it, which the students bring to school with them, are the only ones they have. We have no choice but to work with them."**
>
> — pg. 42; *The Climate for Learning*

When students are given the opportunity to use their own language, they have an effective means of describing their world. As teachers, we need to watch our ethnocentric bias toward the type of language we expect to see used. When getting students to write drafts

the teacher needs to be sensitive enough to listen *for* stories, not *to* stories.

Here's an example from a grade eight student. The class was given a choice of assignments: something from the ideas list or what they had done the night before (which happened to be Halloween). This connected with Albert Badger, who had not placed much in his file folder to that point.

Halloween Night

On Halloween night I stayed home and gave out the candy. It was kind of boring and hardly anyone dressed up. Most of the kids just came to try and get candy. I didn't give them any because they didn't dress up.

I gave candy out until 8:00 then Brain came and picked me up with his van there was me Brain, Dwayne, Dendrick, and Eirics. They told me get some eggs for myself because they each had a dozen eggs to.

We went all over then we seen Dale, Dean Dallas and Mike. We slowed down and opened the side door and throw at them one of the guys hit Dale on the butt. I throw my eggs from the back door.

Then we went for a cruse then as we passing Armind they throw eggs at us. So we turned around and chased them. We went right beside them and they opened the doors and nailed them pretty good. Then we passed them and I told Brian to slow down and then I opened the back door and throw at their windshield. I must have thrown about 7 eggs.

Brain septd on it while going around a cruve w almost tiped. Then he wasn't looking where he was going and we almost hit a fire hidrent went into the ditch and got stuck we all got out and pushed him out. Than me Dwayne and Eirics walked home we didn't want to ride with him again.

This is a detailed, exciting narrative if the teacher doesn't let the grammatical and spelling errors get in the way. (Tell that to the spelling checker in the computer I'm using.) Albert had something to tell us, and that vision was placed on paper. His lively tale of the mayhem Halloween Night creates in Wabasca is clearly drawn. I bet his Mom had a fit when she read this.

I liked the sense of fun Albert had, and the enthusiasm shown in the writing. It held my interest. I knew that with help, Albert could sort out most of the minor mistakes made in getting down this vision while he remembered it all.

Terry Durnnian, teacher at Clarence Jaycox School in Loon Lake discusses the need to pay attention to the inner voices of student writers:

Inner Voices

> Writing and the teaching of the writing process is a continuous and constant force of self-expression. My students possess an inner voice that was created by a wealth of experiences, positive and negative. I may not understand them socially or culturally, but they're nevertheless legitimate. I try to listen and be positive to their ideas, feelings, opinions, dreams and fears. For this is a trust. They are communicating their inner voices with me, a part of themselves. Self-disclosure, especially in the self-conscious teenage years *is a big risk*. I respect this. Writing from the inner voice can be an expression of joy and of pain. Both are equally accepted as intricate parts of an individual. What I stress is honesty in their writing, honesty with themselves.
>
> As a teacher I try to stimulate, prompt and trigger the individual inner voice of my students for an honest expression of themselves. It is a lot easier for students to repeat what happened on a television program the night before. But I want to hear their voices, not someone else's.
>
> With Floyd (a student in my class whose writing is featured in the *Student Expressions* anthology), there is an inner voice struggling with the physical language to express and articulate itself. He has feelings and experiences he wants to share but has problems translating them into words. Knowing this student I can see the risks he took in his writing. I respect and appreciate his self-disclosure. Once students realize you honestly desire to hear how they feel and what they think, they slowly start opening up more and more in their writing; being honest with themselves and you. As the students started sharing, I found myself doing likewise. I took risks, sharing my writing with them. They returned respect. We both grew through the writing process."

Terry's discussion leads to one possible consequence of the writing process. When children find someone with the ability to show empathy and respect for what they write, they may choose to share with you the serious problems they are going through. These can range from loss and grieving to abuse, depression and suicidal feelings or behaviours.

Always remember the legal responsibilities you have for the needs of your students. If a student writes something which concerns you, don't panic. Report it immediately to your principal. If you feel competent to do so, discuss the issue with the child. If not, at least acknowledge that you've received and understood the message.

Recently a student talked to me about some of the problems he was going through. I shared some writing I had done after an accident that had occurred near my home. After our conversation the student took steps to resolve the problem. This poem arrived the next day.

Who Cares About Life?

If you're having problems . . . who cares?
If you're feeling down . . . who cares?
If you're being abused . . . who cares?
If things don't go your way . . . who cares?

Well to tell you the truth . . . I care!

Life is dumb, you say.
Life is hard, so you have to pay.
Life is drugs, you get high.
Life is booze, you drink your rye.

Life is tough, can't take it any more.
You pull the trigger. You settle the score.

But wait . . . talk to me . . . don't give up on life.
Give it a chance because
Life can be paradise.

— Dwayne Cardinal

Sharing writing, accepting the importance of what the student has to say, is vital to the writing process and the teacher's role as a trustworthy, empathetic human being.

(Note: If you're not satisfied there are services within your community to adequately cope with the problem, ask your principal to call Alberta Social Services or Alberta Mental Health in your region through the "Government R.I.T.E. Number" — Dial '0' and ask for Zenith 22333.)

3. REVISING

Revision is the personal act of rewriting. This involves discussions on content and form. Therefore revision incorporates all aspects of the writing process. For clarity's sake we will separate revision and editing by looking at changes in content through revision, and

changes in form through editing. This allows us to look at content conferences, a powerful method to encourage a writer to revise.

Patti Publicover who teaches at Little Buffalo School explains her approach to revision and tells how she helped Jason Laboucan revise "The Big Summer Vacation".

> One of the key stages of the writing process is revision. This is a delicate stage because as teachers we are asked to "judge" student content as well as form. What students see as acceptable content may be at odds with what we know they are capable of producing. Conferences between student and teacher need to be as constructive and frank as possible.
>
> When I discuss students' work with them I make sure to mention what I like about the piece, then mention what I think are the weak points and what I think can be done to improve the writing. I put these forward as suggestions and then leave the student to do the revisions.
>
> In the case of Jason's story, "The Big Summer Vacation", I felt only minor changes in form and content were necessary to polish the story. I suggested an edit to fix up punctuation and paragraphing and then we'd take it from there. Since Jason hadn't seen the piece of writing in over a year (it had been completed for another English teacher's course), he decided to add more details to his original story. What resulted was a different, more sophisticated version. We then sat down at a computer with both drafts and came up with the final version, a combination of the two earlier ones. This final draft appears in *Student Expressions*.
>
> Because I entered Jason's writing process at the midpoint, our initial conference was quite lengthy. We discussed how he came to write his story (a vivid childhood memory), and I explained why I enjoyed reading it. What I particularly liked about "The Big Summer Vacation" was the juxtaposition of the traditional way of life (riding in a horse drawn wagon, hunting, trapping and camping) with the evidence of the modern world (the tipped grader, the truck ride home). I was also amused by Jason's dry, matter-of-fact humour; something of which he was completely unaware.
>
> As Jason and I continued to work on his writing: revising, editing, and completing his final draft, we spent time discussing the whole concept of writing. He told me he did most of his writing at home, at the kitchen table. He would think of what to write and then concentrate on getting

it down on paper. His ideas come from television, books and personal experiences. He wrote "The Big Summer Vacation" quickly because he remembered it clearly and it was an enjoyable experience. Writing the story for others was the only motivation he needed.

So often we ask students to write about things they've never experienced or are of no interest to them. These assignments have no meaning for them. By having an open dialogue with our students throughout the writing process we can understand what motivates them to write, and help them along the way.

These discussions are conferences between writer and reader about a piece of writing. They can occur in the classroom, in the halls, during the lunch hour, even by telephone in the evenings. Writers' conferences become more spontaneous as the year progresses, but it's important to set the expected tone at the beginning of the year. Tom Romano indicates the difficulty in sharing writing when he writes:

> " . . . to share those true feelings with others is a profound act of faith and trust — a willingness to become vulnerable."
>
> — *Clearing the Way: Working with Teenage Writers.*

The writing conference is the forum for sharing this writing, to one other person, to a group or to the whole class. Conferences need to be set up with care: the purpose of the conference should be clearly defined and the expectations of students clearly laid out.

- **Peer Conferencing**

Students generally can be counted on to be very sensitive to each other's writing. My job is to direct them to help the writer by listening for stories, rather than to stories. If all the preparatory work is done, the psychological setting of the classroom will lend emphasis to a supportive and helpful discussion of the students' writing by other students.

To start I ask the students to choose a draft they feel comfortable about sharing, several weeks after the writing assignments have begun. Each student then finds a partner. If I have an odd number of students I become a partner as well, so I have a piece of writing ready just in case. I ask the students to read the draft they've selected to their partners. Some students feel very self-conscious about this so I will allow silent reading too, but I point out that writing can be very compelling when read by the writer.

On a separate piece of paper I ask each reader to respond to the writing with a sentence which tries to describe the intention of

the writing, a comment on a part of the draft they really like, and one question which might help clarify some aspect of the draft. I ask the reader to sign the piece of paper and return it to the author to be placed with the draft in the writing file. I want students to take responsibility for what they write. . . ALWAYS.

Later, perhaps the next day, I ask all students if they wished to revise their drafts based on the comments made by their partner. Often they don't, but given time these conferences can spark new ideas that end up in the writing.

As the year progresses these conferences become more spontaneous than planned. I wander around the room listening to the conversations writers are having about writing. I listen for ideas students are exploring and add my encouragement and support to the quality of the writing. I can add my concerns about voice, cohesion and unity in an ongoing discussion with each writer. This helps them to delve into the ideas they're trying to communicate and helps them shape the language, explore, experiment and continue to strive towards good writing.

I ask students what they think a fellow writer should look for to improve the quality of drafts. They often refer to a huge poster on the wall in my classroom which asks "What is Good Writing?". I've taken this from Kirby and Liner's book *Inside Out*, page 91:

What Is Good Writing?

1. Good writing has voice — it is honest.
2. Good writing moves — it builds with variety, it chases, twists and turns.
3. Good writing has a sense of humour — it doesn't take itself too seriously.
4. Good writing is inventive — it says something new (or something old in a new way).
5. Good writing is informative — it has something to say; each writer has his own area of authority.
6. Good writing has a sense of audience — it is aware of the reader's needs.
7. Good writing uses detail — but not too much detail.
8. Good writing uses words that sing — rich in imagery and associations, strong in rhythm and repetition, filled with word play.
9. Good writing looks good on the page — it is designed to appeal to the reader.
10. Good writing demonstrates control of conventions — grammar, spelling, construction, and word usage.

These criteria are very useful. They allow writers to make judgements based on expectations of good writing. They allow for critical comments to be made by myself or classmates which the writer understands are to improve the quality of the writing. These criteria include reasons for revising content and editing for proper word usage. The key to good writing is that the writer **is aware of the reader's needs.**

Conferences can acquire some interesting characteristics as students recognize the expertise of their classmates. Students not always included in the general discussions in class find classmates approaching them for help with word usage. In return I've seen these students ask others about their experiences so they can get a better handle on an idea they're exploring. The conferencing process can evolve into a year long discussion of writing by a community of writers who have for a short time each day dropped the traditional teacher/student relationship within the classroom. The more confident your writers become with the act of writing, the more involved these conferences become. Romano suggests that:

> Conferences are so immediately human, and provide:
> — helpful facial expressions
> — eyes that show interest
> — a human voice repeating the writer's words, asking genuine questions based on those words."
>
> — *Clearing the Way: Working with Teenage Writers*

Conferences help the teacher know more about the learner. They are an excellent way to become aware of the interests of the students as Neil Kowal suggests earlier.

4. EDITING

Not all conferences need be on content. I'll refer to revision, which examines form and conventions as editing. Taking Kirby and Liner's criteria again, I ask each writer:

a) Does the piece of writing the student's editing take care of the reader's needs?
b) Does it use sufficient detail?
c) Are the words rich and powerful with strong imagery? Does the writer flinch when describing events that may be uncomfortable?
d) How does the draft look on the page?
e) Is this the best format for the theme of the piece? For example, a piece of prose may work better as a poem.
f) Are illustrations necessary to focus the piece?

g) Has the author control over conventions so that the clarity of the writing is not affected?

h) Is the writer comfortable with the word usage, or is there more precise language available to improve understanding?

These questions are given to students for pieces they select to edit with the intention of publishing them as not all writing placed in the writing file needs to be taken to this stage.

Sometimes these drafts are edited in conferences with classmates or myself. Sometimes they find a computer, rewrite the piece and run the results through the spelling checker (I warn them to not pay attention to corrections of proper nouns.) I introduce the class to a handbook of English. One that I use for Junior High students is called *The Nelson Canada Young Writer's Handbook* by Allan A. Glatthorn and Willa F. Spicer. One hundred and thirty-six pages long including the index, this book is divided alphabetically into all the pertinent conventions of English necessary for good writing. Its compact size makes it far less formidable to use than other handbooks. A writing handbook such as this is particularly useful when a group of people is working with a writer tackling problems with punctuation, verb tense and grammatical usage.

I encourage students and try to make them comfortable with using a handbook of English. If through conferences I've discovered a commonly repeated grammatical mistake, I will run a quick lesson for everyone. It's always more effective to teach grammar to help students improve a piece of writing important to them. Most speakers of English cannot identify to any great degree all the parts of speech, punctuation, and word usage they've been taught. Grammar delivered in isolation to writing is soon forgotten. If students know where to look for help when problems are identified by the group or the teacher, they find and choose the conventions necessary to make the writing as clear as possible.

When Albert discovered that I was interested in using his narrative "Halloween Night" he asked for a conference to help edit the piece. He didn't wish to change much in terms of content. He was satisfied he'd described the scene fairly well. What Albert cared about was that the writing was "O.K." — that there weren't too many spelling and grammatical errors. We went through it quickly and came up with this:

Halloween Night in Wabasca

I stayed home until eight o'clock giving out candy. I was pretty bored because hardly anyone dressed up. I didn't give them any candy unless they had a costume on.

Then Brian came to pick me up with his van. Along with Brian and me, there were Dwayne, Dendrick and Eric. They told me to get some eggs. They already had a dozen each.

We drove all over Wabasca when we saw Dale, Dean, Dallas and Mike walking on the road. We slowed down, opened the side door to the van and threw eggs at them. One of the guys hit Dale on the butt. I opened the panel doors at the back and threw mine from there.

We were cruising when we passed Armand's truck. They threw eggs at us so we turned the van around and chased them. We drove right beside them and when they opened their door to throw more eggs we nailed them good. After we passed them I told Brian to slow down. I opened the back door and threw eggs at their windshield. By then I'd used up seven eggs.

Brian stepped on the gas going around a curve, and we nearly tipped. Because he wasn't looking where we were going, we hit the ditch, just missing a fire hydrant and got stuck. We all helped push the van out, but then Dwayne, Eric and I walked home. We didn't want to ride with Brian any more.

— Albert Badger

Two girls and I helped with the sentences. Albert fixed the spelling mistakes after I had underlined them for him. We all agreed that Albert had described the incident in enough detail to give the reader a clear understanding of the excitement of the evening.

What surprised all of us was how little editing this piece required. The writing was interesting and lively. The short choppy sentences effectively paced the action.

However, for most writing, revision never ends even after it's been published. New ideas can percolate through the writing at any time, forcing the writer to revise once again.

The writing process is open ended, so the constant revision of ideas is both normal and important to the developing skills of the writer.

5. PUBLISHING

This stage of the writing process comes last and is not the goal for every piece of writing started during the year. In my classroom I've defined publishing as placing writing up on the Writer's Wall,

a requirement each term; reading the writing to the class; sending it to local papers or Northland School Division publications, and placing pieces in a class book published at the end of the year. By the end of the first month students are placing work they've edited on the Writer's Wall. These are read by other students coming into the class at breaks or at lunchtime. There is a constant stream of students from other classes to the Writer's Wall and their enthusiasm for the writing bolsters the students' self-confidence.

Through the current and future editions of this *Student Expressions* publication, students from Northland Schools will have the opportunity to become published authors in a Language Arts anthology written for their peers. Those using these materials outside Northland School Division may have access to similar publications, or may wish to create their own.

A burgeoning market is developing for Aboriginal writers. There is a strong possibility some of our students could make their living as authors.

EVALUATION

As the writing process is a means of encouraging creativity we must provide a supportive atmosphere for this creativity to flourish. Evaluating the writing process becomes a balance between expecting and honouring the best efforts of each student.

I've always considered the writing file of each student to be a major component of each term's mark. I insist that students place two pieces of their own writing on the Writer's Wall. I ask that they select what they consider to be their two best pieces of writing to be marked each term. These may not be the pieces on the Writer's Wall. The students decide how public they wish each piece of writing to be.

I look for the following in each file each term:

a) **Is there a list of ideas to write about, and is this list being added to as the year progresses?**
b) **Is there evidence of pre-writing strategies, drafts and revisions for published writing (based on how much of the writing process was necessary to finish the piece)?**
c) **Are there two new signed pieces of writing on the "Writer's Wall"?**
d) **Are there works in progress in the student's file?**
e) **In the pieces chosen for publishing is there evidence of editing: correction of grammatical and spelling errors?**
f) **Has there been a variety of forms attempted by the writer?**

I assign marks based on the initial strength of each student's writing ability and how much writing has been attempted. I reward the struggling writers for their attempts and the competent writers for their ideas and polish. Those that have little in their files are reminded that effort is the key to their success.

I believe that evaluation should recognize the strengths of each writer, and encourage risk taking as competence improves. I make it difficult for students to fail and award marks to spur greater efforts. The six questions, which help determine each mark, can be used to explain to students, administrators and parents the rationale for the mark.

All through this discussion I have referred to places where modelling writing can help focus the expectations of your students. Modelling your writing to the class changes the psychological setting within the classroom. You've allowed yourself to become vulnerable. Students are given a glimpse of your human face. Because writing is revealing, other aspects of your humanity, which are not always shown in the rigours of the Junior High classroom, can now shine through.

We expect our students to write for us and we show sensitivity and support for their efforts. Every teacher with whom I've spoken who has shared his or her personal writing with students has remarked on the courtesy and sensitivity students have shown to their honest efforts.

Terry Durnnian writes:

> Initially I rejected the idea of sharing my own writing in a classroom. My writing is personal. Then it occurred to me I was insecure about doing what I asked my students to do: take risks and be honest.
>
> I used my writing to help Floyd (and myself) write better. I showed Floyd my struggle with writing — the imperfections, scribbles, arrows and mistakes. He responded positively and respectfully, taking an interest in what I had written. As I helped Floyd with his draft, he would look back to my writing to see what I had done.

In a community of writers, everyone writes. This strengthens the importance and value writing is given in your classroom. It also bodes well for the listening, speaking, viewing, and reading skills you're pursuing with the same students. Courtesy, mutual respect, and co-operation are hard to achieve. When these occur during writing classes, they will be easier to attain at other times.

Writers in a community of writers: modelling writing, sharing works in progress, discussing revisions, editing and publishing worthy pieces, can create successful writing programs in any classroom. The teachers become the catalysts to the creative talents of the students. It's a fascinating and rewarding teaching strategy.

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Jerel Gibbs

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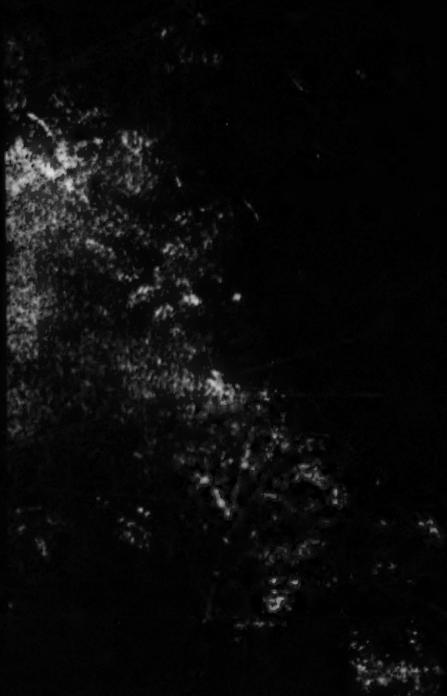

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